

The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM



No. 89

JULY 9TH, 1941

DEAR MEMBER,

The joining of Russia with this country in a common resistance to the Nazi attempt at world domination is bound, whatever we do or fail to do, to have a profound effect on the future of mankind. If we are able to grasp the meaning of this momentous event and know how to profit by it, the result may be lasting good. I asked myself whose opinion, whether I agreed with it or not, I should most like to have to set our minds working on this vast subject. I decided to write to a friend whose judgment I highly esteem and whose knowledge, both of this country and of Russia, gives weight to his opinion. Here is the letter he has sent me :

CO-OPERATION WITH RUSSIA

" I am not in sympathy with those who would refuse to co-operate with Russia on the ground that the Russian Government is, or is alleged to be, a tyranny, that the official creed of the Communist Party is atheism, and so on. It seems to me wrong to keep alive old vendettas. Part of the vices of the Russian regime have been due to the attack of the Western Powers upon Russia at a critical point of her history. If co-operation with her now helps to end that old feud, the moral gain to ourselves, as well as to Russia, seems to me considerable. Nor am I disposed to be shocked by co-operating with 'atheists'. One co-operates with plenty of avowed atheists in this country. Besides I am not sure that sincere atheism is not more Christian than insincere Christianity. 'Not every one that saith unto me, Lord! Lord!' What we have to consider is not merely the Russian Government or the Communist Party, but the Russian people. They are now to be put on the rack. To withhold assistance from them on the ground that one dislikes the political creed of their rulers seems to me politics run mad. It is like refusing to pull a child out of the water because one disapproves of the morals of his parents.

" Even, therefore, if all the hard things said about the present Russian regime were justified, I should not refuse to co-operate with it. But, personally, I think that the picture of Russia, which lays an exclusive emphasis on the dictatorship, the secret police, the periodical mass-trials, the absence of civil liberty and the use—or alleged use—of torture, gives a very one-sided view of the matter. I share the detestation of these things, and I regard the disposition of groups in this country to dismiss as 'bourgeois morality' the disgust aroused by them as nauseous, when it is not merely silly. Against them must be set, however, certain other considerations. The most important is the Russian attempt to make an end of the economic demon, which remains, in Western Europe, the overflowing fountain of envy, hatred, malice and all uncharitableness. Capitalist civilisation is based on idolatry—the worship of money, property, social position. It dehumanises society by making a God of material success. It still often pays lip-service to Christianity, but its convictions are revealed, not by the phrases which it uses, but by its practice. Its practice shows that the Christian doctrines of the supremacy of the inner life, the brotherhood of men, the equal sanctity of human beings as the children of God, are repugnant to it.

"The Russian regime, as I see it, has struck a gallant blow at this particular form of devil-worship. It is in danger of substituting the idol of collective material prosperity for that of individual self-advancement which has corrupted the Western world. But it has, at least, recognised that the exploitation of man by man, the scramble for profits, the deification of private riches, are odious vices. Unless I am misinformed, it has, in these matters, sought to realise a conception of human life which is more nearly Christian than is the frank mammon-worship of our own country. That is an enormous step forward. To recognise, and be grateful for, that achievement is not at all to condone the political tyranny which, unless I misconceive the Russian regime, has accompanied it. I do not desire that the Russian version of socialism should be imitated by this country. It would mean the sacrifice of values of great importance, and it would be highly discreditable to us, if we consented, or were driven, to employ the same methods as Russia in our attempt to create a juster economic order. But that does not alter the fact that the Russians have grappled with a task which we have evaded. We ought to recognise and appreciate the greatness of that achievement, without surrendering the values which find expression in religious toleration, political democracy and civil liberty.

"It is said that, if we co-operate with Russia, we lose our moral title to condemn the monstrous barbarities of the Nazi regime. I do not think that statement will hold water. It is perfectly true that all totalitarian regimes, like all democracies, have *some* features in common. But to conclude that there is no distinction between them seems to me superficial. The characteristic vices of the Russian system are those of the Russian old regime. It has not emancipated itself politically from the odious traditions of the autocracy which preceded it, but it appears to me, in several vital respects, to be an improvement on it. The characteristic vices of the Nazi system have also, no doubt, deep roots in the retarded political mentality of Germany. But it cannot be said that they are a legacy from pre-1914 Germany, from which its present rulers have failed to emancipate themselves. On the contrary, they appear to be a deliberate attempt to discard the nobler element in German pre-1914 civilisation and to idealise the baser.

"Again, the attempt to establish economic and social justice has certainly been one element, and a very powerful one, in the Russian revolution and its later *sequelae*, though it has been often made by means which conflict with the end. I cannot see that redeeming feature in German National Socialism. Its leading *motif* seems to me to be the sacrifice of every other aspect of life to the single end of national aggrandisement, and domination. Given a world in which peace was reasonably secure, I should expect Russian Communism to be gradually humanised. I cannot see any way in which National Socialism can be humanised without ceasing to exist. Russia appears to me to have been guilty of great crimes in pursuit of a noble end; Germany to have been guilty of greater crimes in pursuit of an end which, if attained, must be ruinous.

"Can any benefit to mankind, other than the defeat of Nazism, result from the co-operation of Great Britain with Russia? I think it can. The veiled conflict between the two countries during the last twenty years has been one of the major evils of Europe. Russia and Great Britain have now been brought together, in order to resist a common enemy. If each regards the other merely as a necessary evil in the shape of a temporary military ally, they will miss a priceless opportunity, and are unlikely, I think, to make much even of the military alliance. May we not hope that, without surrendering the distinctive characteristics which each values, they will try to understand each other rather better? We ought to show that we respect the Russian attempt to establish a juster society than Western capitalism has succeeded in producing. The Russians ought to recognise that there are elements in the British liberal tradition on which it will do them no harm to reflect. We are the more experienced of the two, and it is clearly for us to make the first advances. While the war continues, I should wish that, in addition to military measures of assistance, we should try to do something which shows that we feel for the Russian people as human beings, e.g. by doing what we can to augment the provision for the wounded, sick and other non-combatant victims of the war, to offer economic assistance, etc., as

we did, in the last war, in the case of Serbia. When the war is over, I should wish to see a serious effort to establish closer social and intellectual relations, e.g. by welcoming Russian students to British Universities."

A MASS SOCIETY

In the Supplement describing the present predicament of our society my purpose was to direct attention to certain tendencies at work in it. I did not intend to make any assertion about the extent to which they have actually established themselves. No generalisation in regard to the facts can be equally applicable to all classes of society or all parts of the country. One of our members who has an exceptional knowledge of the East End of London has written me the following letter, which supplies some necessary qualifications of what was said in the Supplement.

"I am, of course, in general agreement, and when I talk and write mine is much the same theme. At the same time I think we can exaggerate the effects of mass social and industrial life. I find that this mass life, while superficially *there*—in the 5000 man industry or the 500 family block tenement—still contains within itself a number of dynamic self-determining, vigorously independent atoms, who are very keenly alive to the condition to which you point and who react very sharply when the weight of the mass becomes too heavy. Mass life admittedly relieves those subject to it of much responsibility and may well have an enervating and debilitating effect; but it also conserves energy. Meet these members of the mass at the end of the day, in shelter, at street corner, in pub and elsewhere, and you find that they are surprisingly vigorous, querulous—by no means submissive. Look at it from the social point of view. I spend my every 7 p.m. to any hour of the early morning knocking around my streets, shelter communities, street fire parties, tenement committees, a self-organizing 'let me run me own show and don't interfere with me' lot of folk who show little signs of herd victimization. Our large cities with their miles of bricks and mortar, which from the air present an undifferentiated mass of dwellings, are in fact—*what?* Often a number of village communities, centred around a square, a block of flats, a parish church, a group of streets marooned maybe by big main thoroughfares—the members of each one of these communities attending the same church (if they go at all), the same pub, the same club, the same few corner shops, the same street market, and their children go to the same school. Surprisingly ignorant they are of what is going on round the next corner and amazingly devoted to their own. I can assure you that there is an—at times embarrassing—amount of rugged individualism, character and initiative about. *It is largely wasted.* Because (a) poverty or semi-poverty deprives large numbers of the time and the occasion to use their talents; (b) this situation is shamefully exploited by those who have power and money (not only 'capitalists' by any means—local dictators abound); (c) our political machinery is not devised to use this wealth of personal talent which is in our midst."

THE QUESTION OF CONSCIENCE

The publication by the Society of Friends of a statement on *Obedience to Conscience*¹ deserves attention for three reasons. First, because every responsible reminder of the claims of conscience, which are apt to receive short shrift in war-time, is to be welcomed. The capacity to say "No" to prevailing sentiment, custom and ideas is the mainspring of moral progress. Secondly, in the matter of loyalty to conscience the Society of Friends can look back on a long and honourable history; it can justly claim to speak with expert knowledge. The statement reminds us that the Society "was born in the experience of men and women who met publicly for worship, knowing that the cost would be dis-

¹ Friends House, Euston Road, London, N.W.1, 2d.

turbance by the magistrates and soldiers, loss of goods and chattels, imprisonment or even death." Thirdly, the occasion of the statement is the new forms in which questions of conscience are presenting themselves to-day. The Society is disturbed by the fact that while conscientious objection has been acknowledged as a ground for exemption from military service, it has not been recognised in the extension of conscription to industry, fire-watching and civil defence. The Minister of Labour stated in the House of Commons, "I cannot admit the principle of conscientious objection to civil work."

The pronouncement is a convincing restatement of the case for respect for conscience, but does not go beyond this. The problems arising from the new collectivism of modern society are hinted at but not explored. The expanding authority of the community creates fresh perplexities for the pacifist as well as for others. Refusal of military service is a relatively simple decision. Its extension to the making of munitions is understandable. But fire-watching is a matter not of taking but of saving life. To join with one's neighbours in extinguishing a fire, has always been looked on as one of the plainest of social duties ; and the obligation is hardly altered by the fact that the fire originated through enemy action.

The questions raised in this statement have a wider reference than the relation of the Christian conscience to war. In a planned society the range of activities which are subject to collective decisions will be greatly increased. If on a variety of issues a large number of individuals want to contract out, the plan becomes unworkable. The growing complexity and inter-connectedness of social issues will make it increasingly difficult for the individual either to resist successfully or to form by himself a right judgment of the points at which the Christian conscience ought to offer resistance. He will need in a greater degree than was ever necessary before the guidance and support of the Church.

Yours sincerely,

J. H. Oldham

Bound Volumes—Volume I (Nos. 0-26), Volume II (Nos. 27-52), bound in green cloth with gold lettering and index. 8s. 6d. each, post free. Volume III (Nos. 53-78) now binding.

Folders—Black rexine with "C.N.L." in gold, to hold 26 Letters and Supplements. 2s. post free.

Indices—Indices to Nos. 0-26, Nos. 27-52, and Nos. 53-78, 1s. each, post free.

Subscriptions—The rate of subscription to the News-Letter is 12s. 6d. (\$3.0 in U.S.A. and Canada) for one year, and 6s. 6d. (\$1.50 in U.S.A. and Canada) for six months, and 3s. 6d. for three months. Back numbers—4d. each, 1s. 2d. for 6, 1s. 11d. for 12 copies. Post free.

Groups—Special terms for Groups subscriptions can be had on application.

All communications and subscriptions should be sent to—

THE CHRISTIAN NEWS-LETTER, ARLOSH HALL, MANSFIELD ROAD, OXFORD.